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ABSTRACT

Few studies concerning siblings have taken a lifespan approach, i.e., studying sibling relationships from childhood to old age. To outline the developmental changes that occur in the quality of the sibling relationship during various periods of the life cycle and to test the feasibility of devising a coding system to identify such changes, 47 adults were interviewed about the quality of their closest sibling relationship during seven periods of their life cycle. Responses were analyzed according to an eight-category coding system. Results revealed multidimensional developmental changes, such as greater perceived differentiation between siblings early in life and the provision of support during critical life events, such as the death of a parent. The study findings support the feasibility of a coding system to aid in future cross-sectional and/or longitudinal research. (Author/JAC)

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Sibling Relationships: A Retrospective Lifespan Study

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Sibling Relationships: A Retrospective Lifespan Study

Most studies concerned with siblings have examined the effect of variables, such as birth order and family size on the individual (Altus, 1967; Schachter, 1964) rather than focusing on the sibling relationship itself. Moreover, research that has focused on the nature of the relationship has been largely limited to childhood and adolescence (Bowerman and Dobash, 1974; Cicirelli, 1980). A lifespan approach to the study of sibling relationships from childhood to old age has not been systematically presented.

The present study attempts to broadly outline some of the developmental changes that occur in the quality of the sibling relationship during various periods of the life cycle. The drawbacks of a retrospective research design, (i.e., distortion of information through reconstruction of events from the perspective of the present) were recognized by the investigators. However, this initial approach provides a preliminary understanding of lifespan changes that will facilitate future cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of this relationship.

A second purpose of the study was to test the feasibility of a coding system that could be used to qualitatively and quantitatively categorize various aspects of the sibling relationship.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 35 women and 12 men with a mean age of 59.3 years (s=4.3). The percentages of respondents found in each educational category were: 1) 56% had not completed high school, 2) 34% had high school diplomas, 3) 5% had college degrees, 4) 5% had done some graduate work. The occupational categories were: 1) professional (16%), 2) managerial (16%), 3) white collar workers (23%), 4) blue collar workers (23%), 5) full time homemakers (30%). Seventy percent of

the sample were married, while 7% were never married, 5% were divorced, 14% were widowed, and 4% were separated.

Prooedure

Respondents were individually interviewed in their homes by trained interviewers about their closest sibling relationship. This relationship was chosen for study to provide a relatively homogeneous data base across subjects and because the closest sibling relationship is likely to be the most salient and significant one to the respondents. All interview sessions were tape recorded with the permission of the subjects.

Respondents were asked to evaluate the relationship during the following seven life periods: 1) during elementary school; 2) during high school; 3) just before leaving home; 4) at the beginning of the respondent's marriage; 5) at the birth of the respondent's first child; 6) when the respondent's children left home; 7) at the death of a parent. These periods were selected because each represented a significant portion of the life cycle (e.g., elementary school) or a critical life event (e.g. death of a parent).

Results

Each subject's response was divided into thoughts on the basis of ideas, rather than sentences. For example, the sentence, "My brother and I were very close even though we had different friends and we went to different schools" would be considered to consist of three codable thoughts. Any thought which dealt with either the relationship (e.g., "My brother and I worked together.") or with a description of the sibling (e.g., "My sister has blond hair.") was included in the total number of thoughts. Verbalizations that did not apply to either the sibling or the relationship (e.g., description of World War II) were considered

noncodable and were not included in the total number of thoughts. An average of 74% of the total thoughts dealing with the sibling and/or the sibling relationship was codable according to the categorization system described below. The remaining 26% were largely statements descriptive of the sibling.

Eight categories, some of which were adapted from the work of Lowenthal, Thurhner, Chiriboga, and Associates (1975) were used to code each thought. The categories with their respective examples follow: reciprocity (e.g., "He was there when I needed him."); intensity of affect (e.g., "We were extremely close."); positive affect (e.g., "I have warm feelings for her."); negative affect (e.g., "I resented him for not calling me."); similarity (e.g., "We have similar interests."); differentiation (e.g., "She had her friends and I had mine."); compatibility (e.g., "We had fun with each other."); activity (e.g., "We go shopping together."). For each respondent, thought totals were obtained for each of the eight coding categories in each of the seven life periods. Each thought total was subsequently divided by the subject's total number of codable responses for that life period and multiplied by 100 to yield a percentage. Percentages were ranked by life period within each coding category for each respondent. For example, subject A's interview data revealed the following reciprocity responses as percentages of her total thoughts during each life period: 40% during elementary school, 10% during high school, 30% just before leaving home, 50% at the beginning of marriage, 60% at the birth of the first child, 0% when the children left home, and 80% at the death of a parent. The following reciprocity response ranks would then be assigned to each life period respectively: 4,2,3,5,6,1, and 7. Percentages, rather than absolute numbers of codable thoughts, were used for statistical analysis because the former are not biased by the verbosity of the interviewee.

Interrater reliabilities for sixteen randomly selected interviews were determined using Kendall's coefficient of concordance which was specifically developed to assess interrater agreement for ordinal data (Siegal, 1956). Each interview was coded by two trained coders. The Kendall's coefficient obtained for each of the categories achieved statistical significance at the .01 level: intensity (W=.92), positive affect (W=.95), negative affect (W=.81), reciprocity (W=.87), differentiation (W=.87), similarity (W=.80), compatibility (W=.89), activity (W=95), and total thoughts (W=.99).

Since the results of the Mann Whitney U tests indicated the absence of significant sex differences for each of the coding categories, further analyses combined male and female data. The ranked percentages described previously were analyzed by means of Friedman two way analyses of variance (Siegal, 1956). The results indicated that there were significant differences among the time periods for intensity (χ^2_r=22.23; $p < .01$), positive affect (χ^2_r=39.39; $p < .01$), reciprocity (χ^2_r=17.53; $p < .05$), compatibility (χ^2_r=18.65; $p < .01$), similarity (χ^2_r=24.72; $p < .01$), differentiation (χ^2_r=55.10; $p < .01$), and activity (χ^2_r=15.96; $p < .05$). The results for negative affect approached statistical significance (χ^2_r=12.39; $p < .10$). Specifically, respondents reported significantly more intensity responses before leaving home and at the death of a parent than during elementary school, high school, or when the respondent's children left home. The data suggested that positive affect and reciprocity were experienced more frequently just before leaving home, at marriage, and at the death of a parent, than during elementary school, high school, or when the respondent's children left home. Compatibility was reported more frequently during high school, just before leaving home, and at the respondent's marriage than during any of the later periods. Similarity was cited more frequently in early marriage and at the parent's death than at the birth of the first child or when the respondent's

children left home. Respondents used the differentiation category significantly more frequently during elementary and high school than during the experience of a parent's death and the transition to the post-parenting period. Finally, respondents recalled a significantly greater number of shared activities with their closest siblings when the respondents were just married and at the death of a parent than at the birth of the first child or when the children left home.

Discussion

In contrast to some previously reported findings (Rosenberg & Anspach, 1973), the present data suggested that, in general, the sibling relationship remains salient as the individual ages. There appear, however, to be shifts of emphasis in the content of the relationship.

Differentiation between self and sibling was significantly higher during the two earliest periods than at any other time. Differentiation may be conceptualized to include rivalry. Sibling rivalry during childhood has been widely recognized in the earlier literature (Koch, 1956; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970). The psychoanalytic perspective has consistently focused on rivalry as a significant component of the early sibling relationship. The present findings confirm the presence of perceived differentiation between siblings during the childhood and adolescent years. However, differentiation need not always be negative in affect. For example, Ross and Milgram (1980) suggested a constructive form of sibling rivalry, in which the rivalry may serve as an impetus for role modeling. Furthermore, Mosatche and Bragonier (1981) suggested that differentiation may serve the function of allowing individuals to develop their self-concepts by comparing themselves to and differentiating themselves from their siblings.

Two particularly significant events for sibling relationships were found to be marriage and the death of a parent. Most categories exhibited significantly higher percentages of responses during those events than were manifested during other periods. While compatibility or enjoying one another's company seemed to be

important during the early adult years, reciprocity appeared to be particularly critical during a crisis (e.g., death of a parent). This result suggests that siblings may be able to provide important physical and emotional support that may not be readily available at particular times from other relationships (e.g., one's children). The sibling relationship appears to be particularly suitable for the provision of support during times of crisis because of its durability, its accessibility, blood ties, the similarity of background and experience of siblings, and social expectations for that role. It is particularly important to note in this regard that sociological measures, such as interaction rates, while assessing quantitative aspect of the relationship, do not necessarily tap important qualitative aspects of the sibling relationship. Thus, even if sibling interaction rates are relatively low during adulthood, as some studies have suggested (Allan, 1977), the capacity for the relationship to fulfill vital functions may still obtain. The exception to the finding of continuing salience of the sibling relationship involves events that are related to the respondent's children. The focus during those periods is probably on the family of procreation rather than the family of orientation.

Taken as a whole, these findings reflect the multidimensional complexity of developmental changes in sibling relationships. Furthermore, the study has supported the use of the present coding system which allows quantitative and qualitative analysis of a broad range of domains within a particular relationship. Further research, particularly combined cross-sectional, longitudinal studies, should be conducted to clarify and expand our understanding of the changes in the various aspects of the quality of this kinship bond across the life cycle.

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